

Surveying the South

A Conversation with John Shelton Reed

By Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese

Editor's note: On a Saturday afternoon in August 2000, John Reed sat down for a conversation with Betsey and Gene Genovese, noted historians of the South, at their home in Atlanta. The tape recorder was turned on—

JOHN SHELTON REED: Aren't you supposed to read me my rights?

ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE: I'd like to start with what you mean by the South.

You've written a lot about the South. You do all this mesmerizing stuff with how many more people eat Moon Pies down here than in other parts of the country, or go to church, or what have you. But what's beyond that, beyond what those numbers add up to?

JSR: As I've often said, I'm less interested in the South than I am in southerners.

I'm less interested in the region than I am in the group. And social psychologist that I am, I see the group as defined by identification with it. Basically, the question arises: Who are these people who describe themselves as southerners? And what does that mean? How has it changed? How is it changing? I don't see southern identification as some sort of Platonic ideal to which people are in some sort of approximation. I see it as defined on the ground by the folks who choose to affiliate. And this means that the group is open to attrition and infiltration. It doesn't mean the boundary doesn't exist, it just means people cross it. What that boundary contains can change and has changed. What it contains is an empirical question.

EFG: Then why do you think, as I do myself, that history seems to be so important to people's sense of what it means to be a southerner? History, place, continuity in place, family, all of those things.

JSR: I agree with you that history has been and still is important, and that one way many groups define themselves is by a shared history transmitted through ancestry. It's not the only way groups define themselves. Social classes are defined by what they have in common in the present, although they have histories, too. But it's a shared predicament in the present that gives rise to class consciousness.



Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (left) reads Reed his rights before she and her husband, Eugene D. Genovese (right), put him on the record. Courtesy of Dale Volberg Reed.

EUGENE D. GENOVESE: Let me press a bit further on the question of identification as southerners. That identification surely has an objective basis historically. You suggest it has been a changing basis, but then it seems to me necessary to trace the main lines of that basis. What over time has made the South a distinct region, understanding that it has not been static? It seems to me implicit in your work that there is something that could legitimately be called a tradition, which again would distinguish the South and southerners from other Americans.

JSR: Well, the South emerged, historians tell me, as a self-conscious region in the sectional conflicts of the early nineteenth century. These were over slavery. And I don't have much patience with folks who say the Civil War was not about slavery. It certainly wouldn't have happened without it. It's true most white southerners weren't slaveholders, but a good many of them would have liked to be. Folks up where I come from used to sing, "All I want in this creation's a pretty little girl and a big plantation." Just as plainly, southern identification is not about slavery any more. For a long time it was about Jim Crow. That's what Ulrich Phillips said in the 1920s: The "cardinal test of a southerner" was the commitment that the South be and remain a white man's country. That was a glaring and obvious distinction. The minute you crossed into the South you were under a different system of laws. Ninety-eight percent of white southerners in 1942 thought black and white children should go to sep-

arate schools. But that's not what the South's about any more. These days southern identification is not so much a matter of shared history as a shared cultural style—some cultural conservatism, religiosity, manners, speech, humor, music, that sort of thing.

I don't think many southern blacks at the turn of the century referred to themselves as southerners; Booker T. Washington was perhaps the major exception. That's changed. [Political scientist] Merle Black and I looked at survey responses between 1964 and 1976, and southern blacks' ratings of the word "southerner" went from sort of tepid to quite warm.¹ I think what changed was that they began to think of that word as applying to themselves. And certainly there are plenty of examples now of southern black politicians saying, "We southerners," or "We in the South." That's a major change. And if you have a group defined on the basis of cultural style, it's open to both blacks and whites. It's also open to migrants who acquire the style, or to their children (whether they want it or not), in a way that an ancestry-based group isn't open to outsiders. To those of us who like to have southerners around, this is a cheering development. To be a southerner in 1900 meant standing up for Dixie and saluting the flag, and venerating the Lost Cause and its heroes, but the Confederate heritage, for all that it's making a lot of noise these days, is one that's shared by fewer and fewer residents of the South in each generation. We did a survey a while back: roughly a third of white southerners have Confederate ancestors and know it, a third didn't know whether they did or not, and a third knew they didn't. So, that's not what the South's about, these days.

EDG: And tradition?



Reed: "I don't have much patience with folks who say the Civil War was not about slavery." The second day's battle at Gettysburg, from Lee and Longstreet at High Tide, published by Helen Dortch Longstreet, 1905.

JSR: Tradition. There are several different southern traditions, and one of them is the one that you all have written and talked about. It's an aristocratic tradition that came out of Virginia and Low Country South Carolina and got transplanted to places like Alabama and Mississippi. Another is the one that I grew up in up in east Tennessee. It has more to do with Davy Crockett than with James Henry Hammond. It's a boisterous sort of individualistic frontier tradition. It lasted a long time in my neck of the woods. Those two things coexist—maybe with different emphases in different parts of the South, but they're both southern traditions. One gave us country music and stockcar racing, and the other gave us—whatever it is it gave us.

EFG: But here you have, with more charm, intelligence, and wit than almost anyone I can think of, with the possible exception of Florence King, defended that boisterous frontier tradition. It demonstrably is not your own. You are MIT and Columbia educated. You are urbane. You may enjoy country music, but you remain a member of the Episcopal Church. By any, by all, of your favorite objective sociological criteria, you would come across as upper class, not as boisterous frontiersman, east Tennessee or not.

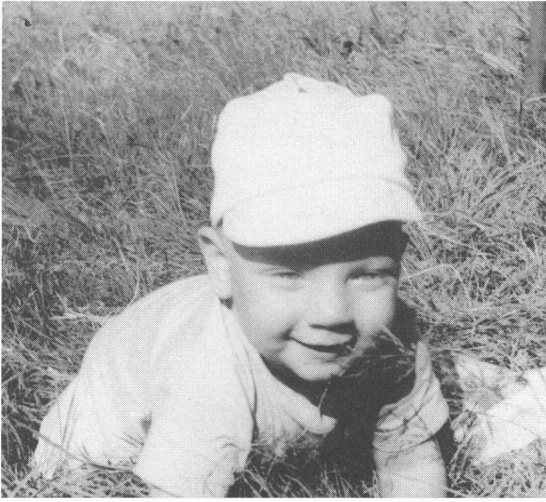
JSR: That's a class thing, I suspect. I'm upper middle class. I grew up in a surgeon's family in east Tennessee. But I did grow up in east Tennessee and I did go to public schools. And one aspect of this tradition is egalitarianism, at least among men. Rank is settled more by athletic ability and physical prowess than by wealth or education. So I can talk that talk, and in a sense it is my tradition. I come from it, and on my father's side, I'm only a couple of generations removed from it. My grandfather was an upward mobility story. He was an orphan boy in southwest Virginia who taught school for a while and then went to medical school. So I don't feel alienated from that tradition. I've done other things as well, but I'm not a stranger to it.

EFG: How would you feel, for example, about the current battles over the Confederate flag? And how would you come down relative to other people from that hill country?

JSR: That hill country tradition was ambivalent and conflicted in the 1860s. I had relatives on both sides of that war in the same county, probably burning each other's barns. And I don't think they stopped fighting in 1865.

EFG: But both sides were probably racist?

JSR: Both sides were racist—probably in a pretty theoretical way because there weren't many black folks up there, but they would have liked to keep it that way, I expect. As far as the Confederate flag goes, I have no problem with people who honor it and see it as a symbol of valor and devotion to duty and heritage. No problem at all. And they mean by it what they mean by it, and not what the NAACP understands it to mean. And they're entitled to their interpretation. On the other hand, my own view is that it doesn't belong as an official



The boy Reed grew up in east Tennessee, where rank was settled by athletic ability and physical prowess. Courtesy of Dale Volberg Reed.

state symbol because those symbols should belong to all or at least most of the citizens of a state. Now that black folks are full citizens of the commonwealth, their views should be taken into account, even if you believe their views are mistaken, as my Sons of Confederate veteran friends think they are. So, partly for political reasons, partly for temperamental reasons, I'd like to see us get the state out of the business of venerating Confederate symbols and let individuals do that if they feel like it.

EFG: Do you think that the current move, at both the state and the federal level, is toward letting individuals do what they choose to do, especially honoring the Confederate flag? Is that the trend in expressing religious views?

JSR: I'm not sure I'd go that far. In fact I think some views are being defined as unacceptable. I don't think there is a strong libertarian tide running in every respect today.

EFG: But that does cast a light on saying cheerily, "Well, we'll get the state out of the business of defending the Confederate tradition." It's like saying we'll get the state out of the business of religion. We'll get the state out of the business of letting boys play football. There are lots of things we can get the state out of that aren't anywhere near as neutral as you make them sound.

JSR: I'm not a thoroughgoing libertarian, although I'm probably more of one than most of my friends. But I think you have to deal with this on a case by case basis. In other words, I'm not consistent. One alternative is to honor all traditions and support all religions, including Wicca. The other is to do none. It seems to me those are the two alternatives when you've got a pluralistic society, and which you do in a particular case is a political decision. Virginia tried to combine Lee-Jackson Day with Martin Luther King's birthday, and that's one way to do it. Probably not stable, but worth a try. Another way is to not honor anybody at all.



Reed: "Virginia tried to combine Lee-Jackson Day with Martin Luther King's birthday, and that's one way to do it. Probably not stable, but worth a try."
From The Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson, The Prentice Press, 1895.

EFG: Do you think not honoring anybody at all poses any kind of problem?

JSR: Well sure it does. A nation, any society, needs heroes. But it's not necessarily the case that the state has to identify them, not if you've got a robust nonstate sector. Ours could use a little "robusting."

EDG: When Zell Miller was governor here in Georgia, he raised the question of getting the state out of the flag issue in the most extraordinarily hypocritical way. He wanted to return to the former state flag, which of course was another Confederate flag. Incidentally, if that had been done honestly it would have made a good point. It's one thing to honor the Confederate tradition, what was positive in it. It's another thing to use the battle-flag, which was imposed by the segregationists in a specific moment. But the main line that the established political opponents took was that we have to take the flag down because it's costing us money. That with the Olympics coming on and this and that, the Yankee money won't come in. Now I was astonished when I heard this. I wasn't prepared to believe that the majority of the people in Georgia, black or white, were prepared to announce that they were whores, but the governor thought differently. My point here, however, is to say that when you take the state out of this, you move the corporate entities in.

JSR: In some moods I share your view that this is contemptible. On the other hand, we've got a republic here that's explicitly devoted to the pursuit of happiness, which these days typically means the pursuit of prosperity and wealth. And Samuel Johnson did say once that a man is seldom so innocently engaged as when he's making money. It's not a particularly edifying thing to watch, but

compare it to the alternatives. Atlanta used to call itself the city too busy to hate. Fred Hobson said once that that's a pretty sorry reason not to hate. But if the choice is between that and hatred, I'll take that.

EDG: Let's sit back a little bit on this question of the South as a region. You've been coeditor of *Southern Cultures*, very good journal, but the name has always bugged me. Every region is made up of alternative cultures, and, as you pointed out, alternative traditions, but if one is going to speak about the South distinctly, then there has to be a meaningful way to speak of southern culture, taking full account that it embraces as wide a range of variations as any other regional or national culture. So what exactly were you chaps up to?

JSR: I fought that battle and lost. I wanted to call it *Southern Culture*. My coeditor, my esteemed coeditor, felt it should be plural, and more to the point our publisher (who at that time was Duke University Press) thought it should be plural. And basically I was out-voted. I had the choice of walking out or living with it, so I decided to live with it. Since then I've come around a bit. It does give us a flexibility that we might not have if we had called it *Southern Culture*. I solicited an article not long ago, for example, on black Baha'i in South Carolina. You can run that piece in a journal called *Southern Cultures*. It's a little harder to do in one called *Southern Culture* because this is such an eccentric topic. But it's an interesting one. Personally, I think there is a southern culture. I think it's shared to a great extent, as I said, by both blacks and whites, and Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and about any other way you want to slice the southern cake. I once wrote a piece on southern Jews who within the American Jewish community look very southern. Within the southern community they look pretty Jewish.² Same story with Hispanics. I was reading a piece not long ago showing that Mexican Americans in Texas actually look like Texans compared to Mexican Americans in California, who look like Californians. But I had to conclude that the name of the journal was a lost cause, and I've had enough of those.

EDG: I, myself, would capitulate on the question of *Southern Cultures* when you run an article on southern Sicilians, but not before that.

JSR: Why don't you write it for us?

EDG: I don't know enough about it. But, seriously here, you mentioned cultural conservatism as one of the hallmarks of the South. And that, too, certainly has changed radically over time. To what extent do you think the South today is significantly more conservative culturally than other parts of the country and why?

JSR: There is this individualistic streak that we were talking about earlier that complicates things, because it's not Allen Tate's kind of conservatism exactly. But just at the level of the survey data I spend a lot of time looking at, you find a more skeptical attitude toward feminism, for example. A less tolerant view of

homosexuality. Fewer people drink liquor. Fewer people are cremated. Sixty percent of funerals in Nevada involve cremation. It's about 2 percent in Mississippi. This conservatism crops up in peculiar ways, but basically it's just more resistance to change. Now I'm not saying that things aren't changing. Plainly they are. But the South remains relatively conservative. In 1919 the issue was women's suffrage. Most western states had it. Most southern states didn't. About fifteen years ago [1984] Mississippi finally ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. But when the Equal Rights Amendment came along, the states that held out against that were primarily southern states and Utah. The issues change, but the South remains relatively conservative. And this is not just a southern white thing, incidentally. On matters other than race relations, black southerners are more conservative in many ways than white southerners.

EDG: My impression is that the black community in the South is much more culturally conservative than is generally appreciated, and that in that respect it is well out of step with its political leadership. I don't suggest here that the politicians are manipulating their people. I don't think that. What I do think, however, is that black people have their own priorities and are prepared to remain relatively silent while their political leaders cut their deals. Nonetheless, in a few polls I've seen on specific issues they send a message saying, "We really don't like this."

JSR: I think you're absolutely right. Of course, the paramount issue for black



Why call it "Southern Cultures"—plural? Reed: "I fought that battle and lost. I wanted to call it Southern Culture." Courtesy of Dale Volberg Reed.

Americans, especially black southerners, has been civil rights and race relations. And as long as there is any question of whether that's settled, they're going to remain understandably with the party that's most liberal on that issue. And that means they're willy nilly staying with the party that's more liberal on other issues as well. But if you look at data on things like abortion or homosexual rights, the black community—and not just in the South but especially in the South—is pretty conservative. It's just that these issues aren't central at this time.

EDG: You contributed an article to a book by fifteen southerners [*Why the South Will Survive*] in which you compare the rough individualism of the upcountry yeoman, to which you have recently alluded, with the genteel tradition that was conservative in a socially organic sense. Your discussion in that essay was the best I've ever seen anywhere, but problems remain. As a historian, I think the one problem that needs a great deal more attention is the extent to which in the Old South that antagonism was transcended. The slave-holders exercised hegemony, but they exercised hegemony by making major concessions to that pressure from below. Now it does seem to me here that one of the unifying forces was this strong commitment to republicanism, and that is what separated the most hardened traditionalist conservatives from their European equivalents. Obviously, slavery provided a framework that permitted a certain kind of ideological transcendence. I would be interested in hearing your thoughts about how that has worked out over time. The same tensions clearly exist today.

JSR: I'm not sure I've got anything intelligent to say about that, but let me vamp for a while. I agree with you that the slaveholders exerted hegemony in most places. I grew up twenty miles from where Andrew Johnson grew up, and he was elected to Congress by running against the stuck-up aristocrats of west Tennessee. But we know what happened to Andrew Johnson. And Parson Brownlow and these folks weren't hegemonized, but they were certainly marginalized. In any case, I think most non-slaveholding whites, as I said, aspired to be slaveholders. A good many of them were related to slaveholders. There was a reasonable prospect that they or their kids might some day be slaveholders. So they certainly weren't interested in emancipation, whether they were slaveholders or not. When push came to shove, these folks turned out and the poor man fought for the rich man for a good long while. These days, I think individualism has probably triumphed. I don't see too many signs of the old organic conservatism around. It's hard to find too many people that actually embody the southern conservative tradition these days. We have southerners who are conservative, who call themselves conservatives, but Newt Gingrich is not the kind of person you're talking about. It's an individualism that's translated increasingly into economic ideology. The South was a solid part of the



Reed: "The solid religious South preceded the solid political South, and to a great extent it still is an evangelical Protestant region." *A Free-will Baptist foot-washing, courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.*

New Deal coalition not because folks were organic conservatives but because they were desperately poor. Now that we're not so poor anymore, folks are beginning to think that people ought to be able to hang on to what they've earned. Government shouldn't tax it away. That sort of libertarian economic thought is probably the natural expression in the economic realm of this strain that's always been there.

EDG: What you seem to be suggesting, and I'm not fighting you on this at all, is that the South in effect, as liberals have been saying for a century, is becoming just another part of the United States. It's remarkable how many new New Souths we have had since 1865, and much of your work has cautioned against exaggerating this. You're now suggesting, however, that the culture of the South is now a culture of industrialization. Do you then think, however unpleasant the thought may be, that at this point in time, a much stronger case can be made that the differences—the regional differences, the cultural differences between the South and the rest of the country—are disappearing?

JSR: Certainly when it comes to economics they are. And for the most part, good riddance. Not too many people are nostalgic about hookworm and pellagra. The South is now the most industrial region of the country. North Carolina and Mississippi have the highest percentage of their labor force employed in industry of any states in the country. The Agrarians' nightmare has come to pass. As usual we're kind of lagging in things because we're getting into heavy industry just as everybody else is getting out of it. That difference is gone with the wind, but there are other differences. I mean the solid religious South pre-

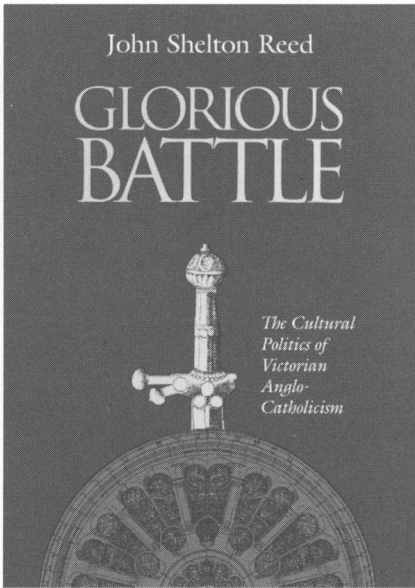
ceded the solid political South, and to a great extent it still is an evangelical Protestant region. Leave Texas and Florida with their big Hispanic populations out of it, and ninety percent of southern whites and blacks are still Protestant. Slightly more than half of those are Baptists of one kind or another. Speaking of individualism, by the way, here it is in the religious realm.

EDG: You've done an enormous amount of work on a wide variety of problems, not only concerning the South, but also your more recent work on the Anglican church [*Glorious Battle*, Vanderbilt University Press, 1996]. Several questions occur to me. One is what you see as the unifying theme in your work. Or perhaps to put it another way, am I wrong in thinking that certain large questions were with you early in your career, and you have been working them out along different lines? Second, I will ask you the question that nobody wants to be asked and everyone is incensed when asked. What do you consider to be your most important contribution to scholarship, your intellectual work, and what is your favorite work? The two are not necessarily the same.

JSR: Let me answer the second and third questions first because they're easier. If I've made a contribution at all, it's been working out the implications of viewing southerners as a sort of quasi-ethnic group. It wasn't an original insight. Other people said it. But I think what I did first was to take that seriously and to ask some of the same questions about southerners that had already been asked for a long time about racial groups and immigrant ethnic groups. Questions about identity, consciousness, boundary maintenance, stereotyping, all of this social-psychological stuff. And that really runs through a good many of my writings, particularly my early work. Probably the most explicit treatment of it is in a little book called *Southerners: The Social Psychology of Sectionalism*. I really tried to take that seriously, and a lot of people have said they find this a useful way to look at things.

My favorite work is probably the book Dale and I wrote together called *1001 Things Everyone Should Know about the South*, not just because it sold the most copies and made the most money, although that's nice, but because it reached the largest audience and did say some stuff that is important. I don't think it's a trivial book. It's not a scholarly book, but it's informed by a good deal of scholarship and it's been well received. It's taught a lot of people a lot of things they ought to know about the South. And it was also fun to write. Dale and I had a good time with that one.

Now, to the question about common themes. The easy answer to that is that both the work on the South and the work on the Church of England reflect my biography. I am a southerner and I am an Episcopalian, and I'm curious about both of those heritages and what it means and how it became what it is. And I've been lucky enough to be able to explore that. It's sort of working out psychotherapy in public. That's the obvious answer. And it may be the actual an-



Reed looks at the cultural politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism in Glorious Battle (Vanderbilt University Press).

swer, but I think you can find some common intellectual themes as well that have to do with tradition, how it's viewed, how it's created.

I really got interested in the Anglo-Catholics when I discovered that that species of Anglicanism was not, as I had always assumed, simply a fossil remnant of the pre-Reformation English church. In the nineteenth century, it was an innovation, a conscious turning back the clock. That got very interesting. All of a sudden here were people who decided they were going to roll back the Reformation. At some level this concern with tradition and how it is manipulated and used and how it shapes the way people think about themselves is the common thread there intellectually.

EDG: Have you considered the work you've done on that subject directly in relation to the southern experience where high church Episcopalianism did not fare well?

JSR: You're certainly right that there hasn't been a high church Episcopal tradition in the South. Southern Episcopalianism has been very much eighteenth-century Anglicanism, low church. That's the church of Robert E. Lee and William Faulkner and Booker T. Washington. (You want to ask what those three people had in common? They were all buried by the *Book of Common Prayer*.) But I have not explored that.

EDG: I was wondering if you thought you might down the road?

JSR: One of the things that I have been interested to learn was that the Anglo-Catholics in England were prominent among the English supporters of the Confederacy, which may not surprise you. Dale and I were just in Richmond at the Museum of the Confederacy where they had an exhibit on Robert E. Lee with a Bible that was sent to Lee by his English admirers, who all turn out to

be—in my book—prominent Anglo-Catholics. But the southern Episcopal tradition has been very Protestant and looks very much like some species of Presbyterianism. Incidentally, that's the tradition I was raised in, sort of low church.

EFG: I was going to ask about your sense of the relations among the different parts of your work, because this is something that people throw at me a lot, that I deal with very different kinds of subjects and topics. And the Anglo-Catholicism is a nice segue into it. Obviously, you're very well known for your insightful and witty essays. You have done a great deal of statistical work on polling data on the nature of the South and how people define themselves as southerners. There's the Anglo-Catholicism. . . .

JSR: Yes, the one thing that all of this work has in common is the biographical angle. I've been extraordinarily privileged, most college professors are, to be able to explore things that I'm interested in. Every time I've had an interest I've been able to go out and pursue it. And the interests and their commonalties have to do with my biography, so maybe there's some sort of intellectual coherence. Certainly since I got tenure, I've been free to do exactly what I wanted to do. And that's what I've done. It's a rare privilege, and those of us who have had it should all be thankful.

EDG: I'd like to ask two related questions. One is that of all those who have spoken frankly as southern conservatives and have remained true to their principles, you may be the only scholar—academic at any rate—who has managed to



Along with William Faulkner and Booker T. Washington, Robert E. Lee was buried by the Book of Common Prayer. From A Popular Life of General Robert E. Lee, published by J. Murphy & Co., 1872.

achieve a large respectful audience outside of your own club. Much of that has to do with your talent and your style. But without taking anything away from that, when one thinks of the short shrift given to first-rate men like Richard Weaver and M. E. Bradford, among others, something else is going on here, and I wonder if you have any thoughts about it? The other question is, your sociological work has always had political implications that you have frankly suggested but that have not been your main focus. Would you share your thoughts with us as to where the South is going politically in relation to other regions, and what trends you think are particularly strong?

JSR: Part of the reason that I've reached a broader audience than some of the people you have in mind is that I've tried to. In my early years I was a careerist. I wanted to succeed. I wanted a good job, so I tried to publish my work in mainstream journals. I didn't send my books to conservative publishers. I got them into university presses. I didn't write for the choir. I was writing actually for other academics whose opinion was going to determine my future. It may just be a matter of politics and diplomacy. I may just be more concerned with that stuff. But I've always been, at least since my grad school days, in an ideological minority, and if I was going to have any friends at all I was going to have to talk to liberals or radicals. You learn to get along with these people. The alternative is oblivion.

EFG: I'm now borrowing from what I can imagine might be some of your more bunkered colleagues' views. Looking back, do you feel you've sacrificed anything for that?

JSR: Some of my old bunkered colleagues also see me as squishy soft. And in point of fact, I am. If I were being defensive, I'd say I'm not as doctrinaire as they are. You might say I'm not as consistent as they are, or as hard core as they are. I'm perhaps a little too ready to see other people's points of view. Now, if you're trying to talk to other people it helps to see their point of view. But it does kind of soften your rhetoric a little bit, and softens your edges.

EFG: No, but it's a real question, the balance between loyalty to one's convictions and the compromises necessary to coexist with the world. You have a unique talent and it's wonderful, but it's a mixed blessing. Of all your cohort, you surely are the one who has managed to make conservatism seem the least threatening to the academy at large. I can't help wondering if you ever have a feeling of frustration. Do these folks understand you have a limit?

JSR: Part of it is having a sense of humor, which may sometimes mean that people don't actually think I believe what I say. And, in fact, some of it I don't believe. I overstate it for laughs. I'm not particularly comfortable being called a conservative. I don't mind being called conservative—adjective—but I'm not a movement kind of guy. I never have been. My species of conservatism, if that's what it is, is sort of Epicurean. I'll try to live a good life and be a witness



Reed: "My species of conservatism is sort of Epicurean." Courtesy of Dale Volberg Reed.

of various kinds, and if anybody is persuaded by that, fine. But I'm not really out to change the world. I don't have any great belief that I'm capable of that. A lot of my colleagues in sociology in particular went into it because they wanted to improve things some way or other. I wanted to explore my interests and learn things that I was interested in. And occasionally I've wanted to entertain and amuse other folks. But my function is more ornamental than anything else. At least that's how I've seen it.

EDG: So what's your thinking on the political position and the course of the South?

JSR: Well, that's getting muddy. The solid South is no more. But the South along with the mountain states is becoming the most reliably Republican part of the country. Although not as reliably Republican as it was once reliably Democratic. But in 1996, the South had 163 electoral votes? Something like that. And Dole got 104 of them.

EDG: I have a theory on that. Southerners are deeply sympathetic people, and they felt that Dole should get some votes.

EFG: You have lived with three strong, accomplished women. What is your take on feminism and its impact?

JSR: You all work it out and let us know what you want. It's okay with me. One thing about living with three strong and accomplished women is you learn to let them tell you what to do, at least as far as women are concerned. I'm solid on equity feminism. I've got no problem there. I can't imagine anybody of any



*Reed: "Well, you know, the South's there. Southerners are there. You kick them, you hurt your toe."
Granville County, North Carolina, 1939, courtesy of the Odum Subregional Photo Study in the Southern
Historical Collection, Wilson Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

sense has any problem with that anymore. But as for the whole rest of the agenda, whatever I say I'm wrong, so I'm just going to lie low on that one.

EDG: I think we should make it clear that of these three strong women, only one of them is —.

JSR: Yes, I'm only married to one of them.

EFG: Two of them are daughters.

JSR: The other two are daughters, yes. And I've got a mother, too, you know.

EFG: All right. You're someone who is very much engaged with culture and who reads broadly. There is a very strong move these days among southern literary scholars to insist, not merely for the present, but when they can get away with it retrospectively, that maybe we shouldn't be talking about the South at all,

or southern literature, but of regionalisms. And the South is one regionalism among many. Now, could any other region produce a William Faulkner or a Eudora Welty?

JSR: We've had similar discussions in sociology, and I presume you have in history. Sure it's true to say that the South is one among many American regions. But it's equally true and obvious, I think, that it's the most distinctive. And one of the earliest. And certainly the most obstreperous and self-conscious. And, to my mind, the most interesting. But if somebody wants to study the literature of the Pacific Northwest, fine. There's not much of it, but . . . the literature of the Dakotas, I don't know. I guess there is some. Great Plains literature, I suppose you could do that.

EFG: Most of those are Native American.

JSR: Right. I get increasingly impatient with this kind of definitional discussion. I think you ought to get on and talk about the literature. Talk about the subject that you're talking about rather than talking about how you're going to talk about it. But that's my growing anti-intellectualism.

EFG: Well, is it anti-intellectualism? Is it anti-theory? And as one who has written a lot of theory myself, I get pretty impatient with what passes for theory these days. Mainly because a lot of it's theoretically dumb.

JSR: Yes.

EFG: I mean it's not interesting. But I want to end with this question: Do you really want to conclude with that level of agnosticism or empiricism that refuses to say that there is something about the South that matters, above and beyond your personally finding it the most interesting?

JSR: In that volume that Gene mentioned by the fifteen southerners, *Why the South Will Survive*, there's a splendid belligerent statement by Clyde Wilson in the introduction about how the South is as real as Hollywood and corn and capitalism and half a dozen other things [p. 7]. Sure it's a concept, and you can deconstruct it in various ways. But it's there on the ground, too. And the fact that there are people who, when you ask them, say, "Hell, yes, I'm a southerner," is every bit as much a fact as the kudzu that's growing in your backyard here. Michael O'Brien is only one of many people who've basically called me theoretically naïve, and I don't mind that label. I was trained as a positivist, and I'm a number-crunching social scientist. I am an empiricist.

EFG: Yes. All of that. Just a poor country boy. That label says more about Michael O'Brien than it does about you.

EDG: Measurably.

JSR: Well, you know, the South's there. Southerners are there. I'm persuaded of that. You kick them, you hurt your toe.

NOTES

1. "Blacks and Southerners," in John Shelton Reed, *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 113–18.
2. "Shalom, Y'all: Jewish Southerners," in Reed, *One South*, 103–12.